

IX. OPERATIONS ISSUES

INTRODUCTION

The major park issues facing Raven Rock State Park were identified by the Division of Parks and Recreation staff at the initiation of the general management plan process. The issues have been divided into three categories: natural resources (see Chapter VI), capital improvements (see Chapter VII) and operations. This chapter identifies park operations issues and makes recommendations for addressing them during the next five years.

Operations issues for Raven Rock State Park that are of significant concern are:

1. Lack of facilities for park visitors;
2. Inability to maintain a continuous prescribed burn program and adequately address other natural resources management concerns;
3. Access and Safety Concerns – Wilderness Camp/Campbell Creek Trail;
4. Sections of poorly defined park boundary;
5. Restricted access to Hardee Tract; and
6. Staffing needs.

LACK OF FACILITIES FOR PARK VISITORS

South Side (South of Cape Fear River)

Background

Raven Rock State Park was established on March 19, 1970 when 222 acres of land were acquired. Since that time, the park has grown in size to 4,667 acres. However, development of even some of the most basic facilities, such as a visitor's center and a picnic shelter, has not occurred. In 1986, a restroom facility was constructed for the picnic area. In 1997, a maintenance facility was constructed with park bond money. The park office is a 60'x12' trailer. This trailer was purchased in 1993 after the first office trailer was destroyed when a tree was blown down on top of it during a severe thunderstorm. No suitable indoor facilities exist for providing environmental education programs for school groups or the general public. The park office trailer is not a safe structure for park staff to occupy in the event of severe weather. In the absence of a picnic shelter in the park, groups have been known to cancel their plans to visit the park when inclement weather has been predicted.

Recommendations

Construct a visitor's center to better serve the public and to provide a safe, healthful and productive work environment for park staff. As is stated in the *Strategic Plan for the Division's Interpretation and Education Program*, "there is probably no more important physical component of a park's I&E facilities than a visitor's center". The interpretation and education program at the park is significantly constrained by the lack of a suitable hub to effectively

communicate the division's interpretation and education messages. "Office space, workroom space, classrooms, auditoriums, and permanent and rotating exhibits are essential to ranger staff in carrying out all of their duties," states the strategic plan.

The construction of two picnic shelters that will accommodate a minimum of twelve picnic tables each is recommended. By providing sheltered picnicking facilities, visitors will have the opportunity to use the facilities when inclement weather occurs. A capital improvement project, described in Chapter VII, would construct a visitor's center and picnic shelters.

North Side (North of Cape Fear River)

Background

Land on the north side of the Cape Fear River has been included in the park since 1973. The only development of facilities in thirty-two years has been the construction of seven miles of bridle trails, a small parking area, an outhouse, and placement of four picnic tables. The small graveled parking area can accommodate approximately eight to ten trucks with horse trailers. At peak times, overflow parking has occurred along River Road, a gravel road with no road shoulders. The section of this road through the park contains many curves and has limited sight distance in several places. Parking, unloading and loading of horses along this road is a visitor safety concern.

Recommendations

A restroom building should be constructed to provide modern sanitary facilities for visitors at the north side. The building should be designed to allow space for a small office for staff, allowing visitor contact opportunities. The parking area should be enlarged to accommodate a greater number of trucks and horse trailers and to eliminate parking along River Road. A capital improvement project, described in Chapter VII, would construct a restroom with an office/storage area and expand and improve the parking area.

INABILITY TO MAINTAIN A CONTINUOUS PRESCRIBED BURN PROGRAM AND ADEQUATELY ADDRESS OTHER NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT CONCERNS

Background

The park is located in Harnett County, where piedmont, coastal plain and sandhills all come together. Consequently, ecological characteristics of these three regions are found in the park. Fire-adapted natural communities have been identified within the park. Of particular significance are remnant examples of the Piedmont Longleaf Pine community. Both Longleaf Pines and Carolina Wiregrass occur, as well as other fire-adapted plants such as Pine Barren Gentian. In 1992, a prescribed burn program was initiated in the park. Currently, 315 acres are under burn prescription. In 1991, a longleaf pine restoration program was initiated. Old fields formerly in cultivation that have been acquired as park property have since been planted with

thousands of longleaf pine seedlings. These seedlings have also been planted within forested prescribed burn units where fire has opened the canopy enough to allow an adequate amount of light to reach the forest floor. No prescribed burns occurred during the period between July of 2003 and June of 2005, due mainly to vacancies in the entry-level Park Ranger position, one of only two Park Ranger positions at Raven Rock. From February of 2003 through April of 2005, a person occupying the entry-level Park Ranger position was actually available to physically work in the park only seven out of the twenty-six month period. In the past seventeen years, the entry level Park Ranger position has been occupied by nine different individuals. The protracted unavailability of one of only two ranger positions has severely hampered the ability of park staff to accomplish many natural resources management tasks. The entry level Park Ranger position has been designated as the lead staff position for natural resources management. Although this important collateral duty would under normal circumstances be assigned to an experienced person of a higher ranger classification, rather than a trainee-level position, there is simply no other staff person to whom this duty can be assigned.

Recommendations

Additional ranger staff is needed to provide the ability to adequately address the management of park natural resources, particularly fire management. An additional position of an experienced Park Ranger classification should be established. Alternatively, the entry-level Park Ranger I position could be considered for reclassification as a Park Ranger II.

ACCESS AND SAFETY CONCERNS –WILDERNESS CAMP/CAMPBELL CREEK TRAIL

Background

The Wilderness Camp is located in the western section of the park, south of the Cape Fear River. It is a primitive, backpack camping area that is accessed by hikers via the Campbell Creek Trail. Vehicular access for emergency response or maintaining this camping area, as well as the Lanier Falls area, is through private property known as the Bethea Tract. This tract is located at the terminus of Hicks Road, a seven mile drive from the park office. Park staff has maintained access to park property through this private land, continuously, for over twenty years. Through a verbal agreement with an individual who leased hunting rights to the property in the mid to late 1990's, and with the consent of the landowner, a control gate was erected by park staff at the terminus of Hicks Road, where state road maintenance ends and the access road through the Bethea Tract begins. This individual supplied a padlock for the gate and provided park staff with a key. The purpose of this gate is to prevent unauthorized vehicles from entering the property. It also prevents traffic from reaching the control gate located on the park boundary, approximately four-tenths of a mile from the terminus of Hicks Road.

During 2003, the owner of the Bethea Tract contacted park staff and expressed an interest in selling the property to the State. The land was appraised and the State Property Office made an offer to the landowner. He declined to accept the amount offered. In December, 2004, park staff learned that the landowner had leased the hunting rights of the Bethea Tract to the Cedar Creek

Hunt Club. Over the years, park staff has avoided crossing through the Bethea Tract on Saturdays during the deer and wild turkey hunting seasons to avoid disturbing hunters and potentially creating ill-will between hunters and park staff. The Cedar Creek Hunt Club has leased other property adjacent to park property in the past, and has been known to hunt very close to the park boundary. This club drives deer with dogs, and the dogs quite often end up chasing deer on park property.

The Campbell Creek Trail has been in existence for more than twenty five years. A trail section of approximately 1,000 feet is located very close to a section of park boundary that is contiguous with the Bethea Tract. In fact, the trail is located twelve feet from the boundary line at one point. It could be assumed that when the trail was originally routed in this location, it was thought that the Bethea Tract would soon be acquired as park property, since it was included in the master plan for acquisition. The potential exists for hunting activity to occur within sight of the Campbell Creek Trail, a genuine visitor safety concern.

Recommendations

It is essential that unrestricted access be maintained by park staff to the Wilderness Camp and the Lanier Falls area, particularly in regard to the potential for emergency response. The safety of park visitors during the hunting seasons is a real concern. The most desirable solution would be to acquire the Bethea Tract. It is recommended that the State Property Office be requested to attempt further negotiations with the landowner to acquire the property. If acquisition of the property does not appear to be a possible solution in the short-term, then another potential solution should be considered. It is recommended that the division seek to enact a local hunting law to:

1. establish a safety zone near the park boundary; and
2. regulate the discharge of firearms toward the park with the enacting of a local hunting law, as has been done at Merchants Millpond State Park.

SECTIONS OF POORLY DEFINED PARK BOUNDARY

Background

Several sections of park boundary line are not well defined or may be erroneous, because of a lack of “witness trees” to indicate the location of the line. Lines on two tracts that were purchased in 2002 were not surveyed prior to acquisition. As boundary lines are maintained over the course of years, boundary lines can begin to waiver off course if not guided by properly surveyed and marked witness trees. Approximately 19,000 linear feet of park boundary line are not well defined. Poorly defined boundaries can provide problems for park staff in determining potential encroachments such as hunting.

Recommendations

Poorly defined boundary lines should be professionally surveyed and appropriately marked. Funds from the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund that are provided for surveying and other

overhead costs associated with land acquisition should be made available to parks on a recurring basis to correct boundary line marking deficiencies.

RESTRICTED ACCESS TO HARDEE TRACT

Background

In October of 1999, 103 acres of property was acquired from the Triangle Land Conservancy, which had earlier purchased the property on behalf of the State of NC from the previous owners. Known as the Hardee Tract, this property is located on the north side of the Cape Fear River, south of River Road, and east of the current contiguous park property. The tract is separated from the rest of the park by a narrow strip of land known as the Langley Tract. The Hardee Tract was formerly part of a larger farm. A section of this property lies between park land and River Road. The landowner has not allowed park staff ingress and egress through their property to gain access to the Hardee Tract. While the owners of the Langley Tract have allowed access to park property by park staff through their property at certain times, access has expressly been forbidden during the deer and wild turkey hunting seasons. Park staff does not have the adequate ability to patrol the Hardee Tract during these times to detect potential encroachments.

Recommendations

Purchase the Langley Tract in order to join the Hardee Tract with the balance of the north side property. This would provide staff the full time legal access that is needed to properly manage the Hardee Tract.

STAFFING NEEDS

South Side (South of the Cape Fear River)

Background

Current Staff:	<u>Permanent Staff</u>	<u>Seasonal Staff</u>
	Park Superintendent II	Assistant Park Ranger (3 mos.)
	Park Ranger II	General Utility Worker (9 mos.)
	Park Ranger I	General Utility Worker (3 mos.)
	Maintenance Mech. II	Park Attendant (3 mos.)
	Maintenance Mech. I	Park Attendant (3 mos.)
	Office Assistant III	Peak-load Office Assistant (year-round)
		Peak-load Park Attendant (9 mos.)

Raven Rock State Park was established in 1970. Within the first few years of operation, a Park Superintendent position and two Park Ranger positions were established. In 1990, a Maintenance Mechanic I position was established, which has since been reclassified to a Maintenance Mechanic II position. In 1994, an Office Assistant III position was established. In 2000, a Maintenance Mechanic I position was created in association with a land acquisition

project. The park maintenance area was completed in 1997, funded by money from the park bonds initiative of 1993. Although a permanent maintenance position was requested in the reserve for this project, only a seasonal position was approved.

In 1974, the park was 2,730 acres in size. At that time, two Park Ranger positions existed. Since then, the park has grown in size by 1,937 acres (41%). In December of 2002, 714 acres of land was acquired for the park from Weyerhaeuser Corporation. The opportunity to acquire this property was presented to the division in October of 2002. A request to secure additional staffing and an operating reserve to manage this significant acquisition of land could not be made at the time of the acquisition, because the deadline for requests to be included in the next biennial budget had past. To date, no additional positions have been established to assist in the management of an area that is larger in size than seven existing state parks.

Since the 1970's the professional standards for Park Rangers and Superintendents have been raised significantly. Many professional management programs have been implemented in our parks. These programs, including interpretation and environmental education, law enforcement, wildland fire management, integrated pest management, emergency medical services, search and rescue, volunteer management and workplace safety require an adequate, well-trained workforce at the park level to administer and manage these programs in a complete and timely manner. However, the ranger staffing level at Raven Rock has seriously lagged behind ranger staffing levels at most other parks in the system. This problem is compounded by the recurring absence of the Park Ranger I.

Recommendations

A higher level Park Ranger position should be established or the current entry-level Park Ranger I position should be upgraded to a Park Ranger II classification. This would provide a trained and experienced staff person to assume a lead roll in addressing natural resources management issues such as prescribed burning, integrated pest management, pine plantation management and boundary line management. The person in this position would work towards attaining burn boss certification and public pesticide operator licensure, both of which are currently handled as collateral duties by the Park Superintendent. A Park Ranger II position could also be assigned collateral duties such as volunteer manager, park safety coordinator, and hazard tree inspection program manager. The park safety coordinator position is being handled by the Park Superintendent. The collateral duties of volunteer manager and hazard tree inspection program manager have been assigned to the Maintenance Mechanic I position. These collateral duties would be better suited to the Park Ranger classification, but have been assigned to other staff because of frequent turnover of the Park Ranger I position.

North Side (North of the Cape Fear River)

Background

Current Staff: Permanent Staff
None

Seasonal Staff
None

Raven Rock State Park is currently 4,667 acres in size. The park is divided geographically by the Cape Fear River, which has an average width of about 300 feet as it flows through the park. The section of the park south of the river is comprised of approximately 3,209 acres, while the north section of the park contains approximately 1,458 acres. The north side of the park has been managed as a “satellite” area by park staff. It is far larger than most other satellite areas that the division manages, and is larger in land area than ten other state parks. To reach the north side from the park office on the south side, staff must drive twenty miles, traveling through Lillington to cross the Cape Fear River on US 401. Travel time to the north side usually takes about thirty minutes. The north side is visited by park staff about three times per week. The Park Superintendent or Park Rangers patrol the north side on weekend days. Park maintenance staff performs custodial and grounds maintenance functions on a weekday. Facilities on the north side include a parking area which is not gated, a small picnic area, an outhouse, and seven miles of bridle trails. As of August, 2005, the bridle trails are in the process of being re-routed and lengthened. Management, protection, and maintenance of this area present park staff with logistical challenges because of the drive time and distance from the south side.

Recommendations

A basic staff should be established to facilitate regular and consistent management, protection and maintenance for the north side of the park. As has been established in the park master plan, management authority for the entire park would rest with the Park Superintendent. However, a higher level Park Ranger position should be established to provide the lead in managing and operating the north side. This position would be responsible for daily operation of trails and other facilities on the north side. This staff position would also assume responsibility for developing and implementing a prescribed burn program and other natural resources management programs for the north side, as well as assuming a lead roll in managing capital development projects, major maintenance, and trails projects. A Maintenance Mechanic I position should be established to address pressing needs such as bridle trails maintenance. As previously mentioned, the current bridle trail system is being re-routed and lengthened. The bridle trails have seriously degraded over the years because of inadequate design and construction, and a lack of adequate maintenance. The renovated trail system is expected to total about ten miles in length. Several erosion control and stream crossing structures will be put in place during the renovation project. It is crucial to the protection of park natural resources that the trail system receives regular and thorough maintenance to stand up to the rigors placed upon it by horse traffic. It is recommended that a nine-month seasonal General Utility Worker position be established to assist staff in natural resources management functions such as prescribed burning, integrated pest management and boundary line maintenance. In addition, this seasonal position would assist park staff in accomplishing routine custodial and grounds maintenance tasks, as well as bridle trails maintenance.

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